



REMINISCENCES OF A FORGOTTEN FIGHTER: THE BOUNDLESS BEGUM HAZRAT MAHAL

Ms. Komal Sharma

Ph.D Scholar, Political Science, Himachal Pradesh University

ABSTRACT

The hard won Indian freedom of 1947 was a consequence of sacrifices made by valorous men and women who kept their motherland beyond everything. To free one's land from the clutches of treacherous alien rulers, the First War of Independence was fought in 1857. It was the first time when people dared to raise their voice against the brutal British rule. Many historians and scholars have come up with extensive writings on the uprising of 1857 and glorified various freedom fighters for their valiance. But, due to numerous reasons many leaders were kept far away from any limelight or glory, so this paper is an attempt to highlight the brave efforts of a woman who was abandoned by her own husband Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh. Despite unfavourable situations by her side, destiny took her to a juncture of life where she was re-entitled as begum and was popularized as the leader of people and an excellent administrator. She led the revolt in Awadh with all her abilities and proved to be a worthy figure. Though, the uprising did not reach its required end, yet it became historic and encouraged leaders of future to fight for the freedom of beloved country.

KEYWORDS: Patronage, Sepoy, Mutiny, Recalcitrance, Proclamation, Recreant, Reminiscence.

INTRODUCTION

With the attainment of seventy five glorious years of India's independence, the acclaimed 'mother of all democracies' is all geared up to become *avant garde* of innovative measures, and set in motion pristine development models in *Azadi ka Amrit Kaal*. At this juncture of country's progression it becomes imperative to take cognizance of efforts made by those men and women who sacrificed their lives to effectuate independence for their motherland. The course of India's struggle for independence was initiated from 1857 when the 'First War of Independence' was fought to drive away the *firangis*. However, often historians miscalculate the whole phenomenon of 1857 and mindlessly tag it to be a sepoy mutiny. As according to their belief only soldiers or mutineers were part of this heroic movement with an aim of getting their grievances redressed. Thus, it became a misnomer that since no common man joined the revolutionary movement it cannot be considered as any war. Notwithstanding such prejudices, one must go through various documents and accounts in detail to put forward any substantial argument. Empirical evidences have proved handy to present a gist that, though the struggle of 1857 was started by the sepoys as a mutiny, it was well supported and got participation from many peasants, *taluqdars*, rulers and common people. Hence, longest struggle for India's freedom and autonomy began right from 1857 in its most consolidated manner. It is true that initially, there was a lack of co-operation, cohesion and organization but as the word started spreading around, uprising eventually gained momentum. From a leaderless and mindless movement it turned out into the First War of Independence which taught britishers an unforgettable lesson. The impact was such that the administration of Indian provinces was directly transferred from East India Company to the British crown. It was for the first time that the alien rule on Indian land was challenged with such great fervor which acted as an eye opener to the chauvinistic attitude holders. Many leaders with their courageous followers led the successful rebellion and fought the outrageous situation. And as a consequence today, when we read and remember the war of 1857 we never forget to pay a tribute to the freedom fighters like Tanya Tope, Bahadur Shah Zafar II (the then Mughal Emperor), Mangal Pandey, Nana Saheb and Jhansi's brave queen Rani Laxmibai in whose praise many poems and couplets were penned down which manifests her valour. One out of these was the majestic '*khoob ladi mardaani wo toh jhaansi wali rani thi*' by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, similarly Savarkar and Rabindranath Tagore also gave space to this fearless woman in their writings. On one side some heroes of war of 1857 were popularized to the greatest extent, on the flip side there remained those who did not attract much deserved attention and were kept aloof from any limelight. Very few scholars and historians have mentioned them in their nominal writings. So, it becomes vital to remember these unsung heroes and heroines which include many *dalit* men, women and people from different stratas of life who sacrificed their lives for their countrymen.

Early Life of Begum

One of these fearless fighters, who is often less talked about is queen of Oudh Begum Hazrat Mahal. Oudh/Awadh is presently situated in north eastern part of Uttar Pradesh and holds substantial historical importance. A true insignia of feminism, the only woman ruler of this area who became chief spokesperson of the Awadhi population. Begum Hazrat became leader of the people when Awadh had already been annexed in early 1856 and Nawab of Awadh Wajid Ali Shah without showing any retaliation moved to Calcutta to spend rest of his life in patronaging art and culture. Thus, she took the responsibility of administration on her feeble shoulders and led british forces on a merry dance. Apparently, historians hesitate

to present an account of those events and people who are not backed by much documentation and empiricism, probably, that's why enough writings are still not found on Begum till date. She was hardly seen on battle ground unlike Rani Laxmibai who was noticed by Briton forces in the battle field manifesting glimpses of Goddess Durga. However, Begum proved to be a phenomenal administrator and ruler off the battle field who put all her potential and left no stone unturned to protect her principality and the subjects. She suitably did all what her male counterpart was expected to do instead.

According to Rosie Llewellyn Jones-

Born as Muhammadi Khanum, to an African slave, she practiced dancing in a school at Lucknow and was called mahak pari who became a courtesan by profession."

Impressed by beauty and dancing skills of Khanum, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah took her to his harem and made her a temporary wife (*muta*). She then became a royal concubine of Nawab's harem. After giving birth to a son named Birjis Qadir, her status was raised and she was entitled with the name Begum Hazrat Mahal. Her journey from a courtesan to Begum did not remain smooth forever, as under influence of her mother-in-law Janab-i'Aliyyah, she was divorced by Nawab and her title was also taken back. Resultantly, she had to give up all her privileges and was forced to live life of commoner. But who knew that this abandoned Begum was destined to play a very different role.

Awadh was annexed in February 1856 by Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General of India, with the help of Robert Vernon Smith (President of Board of Control from March 1855 to February 1858). Further, annexation of Oudh was also a result of aspiration and anticipation shared by Lord William Bentinck (Governor General, 1828-35) and Earl of Auckland (1836-42) who were ambitious to control the kingdom of British India. Awadh remained under the rule of Mughal Badshah till 1722, after which it was made an autonomous principality under Saadat Khan, an ally of Britishers. East India Company came in contact with this place after the battle of Buxar, 1764 when a tripartite alliance of Mughal ruler Shah Alam, Nawab of Awadh (Shuja-ud-Daula) and Nawab of Bengal (Mir Qasim) was defeated by the British forces and consequently were given a free access to trade in their principalities, additionally Lord Wellesley further compelled Nawab to accept subsidiary alliance in 1801. Over interference by British officials made Indian rulers incompetent to rule which further resulted in cases of mal-administration. Altogether, Awadh had become important as it could enrich the exchequer of *firangis* through private investments especially in cotton and indigo cultivation. Finally Britishers were successful in accomplishing their plan on February 06, 1856.

Though Nawab Wajid Ali Shah refused to completely handover the administration, he was coerced to leave for the sake of his life. *Jan-i-alam* had no option but to leave his earned respect, love and estate far behind to settle down in Calcutta forever. People of Awadh wailed in agony and hopelessness as their beloved Nawab had now been driven from riches to the rags. While shifting from Lucknow (the seat from where Nawab ruled his state) he also left behind his son Birjis Qadir and an abandoned wife Begum Hazrat to face the wrath of alien forces. But this incidence resulted in birth of a valiant, popular Begum who turned out to become a well wisher for people of her state.

The Uprising and Resistance

An uprising began from Meerut (located in north-east of Delhi) by Indian sepoy, when two muslim naiks- Pir Ali and Kudrat Ali spread the word around that the newly introduced cartridges were greased with fat of cow and pig. The peculiarity about these cartridges was that they were to be chewed before their usage and this news was enough for soldiers to believe that their British masters wanted to corrupt religion of both Hindus and Muslims. Raged by insensitive act of Britishers, 3rd Light Cavalry was the first to refuse using these cartridges after which a circular was moved to other soldiers forcing them to follow the same suit. Offended by the soldiers, on May 09, 1857 British officials ordered recalcitrance of all those mutineers who had not abided by command of their masters. In support of their comrades, soldiers of 20th Native Infantry openly fired gunshots at Sadar Bazar in which Col. Finnis was shot dead on May 10. These sepoys also freed their fellowmen who had been imprisoned by nasty British officers. In this manner a low profile sepoy mutiny took shape of an uprising in which bungalows were burnt, looting, plundering were commonly attempted and gradually masses also joined in the rebellion. Moreover, prominent communication channels like telegraph services were also barred which delayed British retaliation. Mutineers finally reached Delhi on May 11, 1857 and knocked the doors of Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II, who resided at the Red Fort. They pleaded him to become face of the uprising but *Badshah* was an aged person who looked so feeble and fragile that it was impossible for him to spearhead any rebellion, therefore he refused to accept the proposal. Unhappy with the decision of Mughal *Badshah*, 38th Native Infantry of sepoys on guard refused to shut the Palace gates, seeing the rage of infuriated mob the emperor had no option but to legitimize the uprising. On 30th May finally a revolt broke out in Lucknow following the same pattern of other revolts. Though, the causes of these revolts differed from place to place, still a definite pattern was followed almost everywhereⁱⁱⁱ.

Revolt in Lucknow was not an impulsive reaction but the seeds of the rebellion were already sown when Nawab of Awadh was ousted from his power. Summary settlement of 1856 further added fuel to the fire by upsetting *taluqdars*, who were pragmatically ruling over peripheral areas. Summary settlement meticulously proved disadvantageous to them as they were forced to give away major portion of their landholdings. Thus one can say that, there were many socio-economic and religious factors together responsible for the upheaval in principality of Awadh and elsewhere. At this junction, proclamations were issued in multiple languages like- Hindi, Urdu, Persian and people were called upon to join the rebellion. The first encounter at Lucknow between rebels and British troops took place at the battle of Chinhath in June end and the British troops headed by Sir Henry Lawrence were defeated as an upshot.

During the rebellion and in immediate aftermath public mourning for British children who died served the much purpose as mourning for British women.

Dead children became a rallying point for British military mobilization and symbols of British innocence, Christian sacrifice, racial difference and moral superiority.^{iv}

The rebels now resolved to make Jan-i-Alam Wajid Ali Shah's twelve year old son (Birjis Qadir) their new Nawab. In reality however it was *Begum* Hazrat Mahal, mother of Birjis who had to take all the decisions and she readily accepted to lead the rebellion in the name of her minor son. Birjis Qadir was coronated as Nawab of Awadh in Qaisarbagh and hailed as Kanhaiya (Lord Krishna) by the people. Blatantly, it was a cohesive attempt of both Hindus and Muslims to protect their religious and cultural values which also promoted Hindu-Muslim unity. With this, Muhammadi Khanum was re-entitled with the status of *Begum* and regained her lost prestige and glory. Evidently, after receiving popular support she took the reign in her own hands and issued proclamations, orders and took core decisions after deliberated brainstorming in the court with her confidants. Like an able administrator, she became chief spokesperson of her people and raised their grievances. She herself did not pick up arms in rebellion but was responsible for planning the deployment of troops, with this she was never hesitant to take advice from the court members. Despite being an inexperienced ruler, she well understood the importance of Think- Tank group and held their position in high esteem. Her job was not confined to take decisions and issuing orders or proclamations but also disbursing salaries to the officers and troops, thus she carefully managed financial matters too. Undoubtedly, the boundless *Begum* proved to be a real time example of true feminism in her times.

Despite all the efforts her position did not remain unchallenged. She faced multi competitors who had an eye on her seat and wanted to gather popular support. One out of these ambitious men was Maulavi Ahmadullah Shah, who was also a prominent figure. A British officer Thomas Seaton described the personality of Maulavi Ahmadullah as-

'A man of great abilities, of undaunted courage, of stern determination, and by far the best soldier among the rebels.'

Maulavi was an ardent religious supporter and simultaneously an embodiment of Ganga-Jamuna tehzeeb of Faizabad. Presently known as Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, this place is located on the bank of river Saryu. It is 130 km east of Lucknow, which was the main seat of Awadh. Maulavi had his own set of followers and loyalists who wanted him to become the main leader of the uprising at

Awadh. Since revolt of 1857 was primarily guided by security and protection of religions, it became quite obvious for him to become a leading sensation which created a factional division between the followers of *Begum* and Maulavi. He had also shown his valor in the battle of Chinhath and was awarded with capital punishment for hatching a conspiracy against Britishers, which was later reduced to lifetime imprisonment. It was on May 10, 1857 when a rebellion broke out in most vigorous and high pitched capacity and sepoys reached jails to set free many people, it was then that Ahmadullah Shah was also freed from prison.

When Birjis Qadir was declared as Nawab, Maulavi resisted to become a member of the royal court. He then set up his own camp with Ghamandi Singh and around 1000 followers across river Gomati. On the other side Delhi had been recaptured by Collin Campbell, Commander-in-chief of British troops who now had started heading towards Lucknow in 1858. Though Britishers had to face a lot of resistance yet they were successful in recapturing places one after another. Nevertheless, without losing any hope *Begum* kept demonstrating her courageous and positive attitude with the support from Nana Saheb Bala Rao. Sadly, she was not just fighting against the alien rulers but also natives of the land which hollowed out all her efforts. *Begum* once again gave strict orders to capture estates of all those *taluqdars* who had turned out to be traitors and joined hands with the enemy forces for their selfish gains, Raja Man Singh was one of those recreants. *Begum's* position started frailing as Briton commander was triumphant in besieging garrison out of Residency to Alam Bagh. In this grave situation, to encourage her soldiers, it is rightly believed by some people that she appeared in the battlefield on February 25, 1858 mounting on an elephant's back. Various portraits have been designed depicting valour of *Begum*.

Force under Collin Campbell included around 3000 Gurkha soldiers who were sent by the ruler of Nepal Jung Bahadur for controlling Lucknow. By first week of March 1858 Charbagh, Moosabagh and Qaisarbagh were recaptured and revolt of 1857 was almost at the verge of its end.

Finding no other way, she along with her son Birjis, Nana Saheb and around 1200 followers decided to move out of Lucknow. She escaped to Nepalese border and requested for asylum from Maharaja of Nepal. Unfortunately, her humble plea was clearly turned down as Raja was reluctant to give asylum to one of the biggest enemies of British forces. After a lot of negotiations finally Nepalese authority made up its mind and allowed her to take refuge in Nepal though in lieu of favourable terms and conditions. *Begum* Hazrat continued remaining vanguard of the rebel forces until she escaped to Nepal, after Awadh was repossessed by Britishers on March 21, 1858. Campbell decided to clear rest of the areas by continuing with his mission for some more time. At this stage rebellious sepoys were given an option to surrender for plotting against the British rulers. Besides, *Begum* was also given a fascinating proposal to pay her all considerations due to her as a woman and also as a member of royal family. Despite all these temptations, she refused to surrender to enemy forces and held her head high in dignity. On November 01, 1858 Queen's Proclamation was announced from England and Indian administration powers were taken from East India Company, now, Crown took all the administering authority into her own hands.

To counter Royal Proclamation, in the name of Birjis Qadir, *Begum* issued another proclamation which targeted to bash all the fake promises made by the crown. *Begum* wrote-

'for all the laws of the company, the settlement of the company, the English servants of the Company, the Governor General, and the Judicial administrator of the Company, are all unchanged'

By these words she tried to give a reality check to the people to make them believe that all those captivating promises made by crown were just an eye wash and would change nothing in actuality. Every single word was just a sham.

Valiant daughter of Awadh desired to come back to her place but outgoing circumstances never allowed her to do so. She grew up in hardships and lived a tough life until she died on a foreign land and sadly her grave was not even inscribed by her name. Life was so unfair to her that she could not even die in tranquility.

Birjis Qadir had all grown up when on the occasion of Jubilee of Queen Victoria's ascendance to throne, he was pardoned and permitted to finally enter India. He moved to Calcutta with his wife to stay with the royal family of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, but out of envy and jealousy he was poisoned to death by his own family members.

Evidently, it is not hard to believe that *Begum* Hazrat Mahal lived up to the expectations of her loyalists and proved to be an able administrator. She never hesitated to sacrifice anything in lieu of happiness of her subjects and freedom from dark rule of Britishers. Though the revolt could not reach its culminating end but the valor exhibited on and off the battle field is incomparable and deserves a reminiscence at the least.

ⁱchauhan, Subhadra K. (2014), "*Mukul Tatha anya Kavitaeyin*", Bhartiya Sahitya Inc.,

ⁱⁱJones, R. (2014), "Last king in India :Wajid Ali Shah", C. Hurst & Co. Ltd.

- ⁱⁱⁱMukherjee, R. (1984), "Awadh in revolt, 1857-1858", Oxford University Press.,
- ^{iv}Murdoch, L. (2012). "Suppressed Grief: Mourning the Death of British Children and the Memory of the 1857 Indian Rebellion". *Journal of British Studies*, 51(2), 364–392
- ^vhttp://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadullah_Shah
- ^{vi}Mukherjee, R. (2021), "A Begum And a Rani", Penguin Books.,

REFERENCES

1. Tankha, A., & Allana, R. (2007). Photographs of the Aftermath, 1857. India International Centre Quarterly, 8–24.
2. Stubbings, M. (2016). British Conservatism and the Indian Revolt: The Annexation of Awadh and the Consequences of Liberal Empire, 1856–1858. *Journal of British Studies*, 728–749.
3. Husain, I. (1997). AWADH REBEL PROCLAMATIONS DURING 1857-58. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 482–492.
4. Husain, I. (1998). AWADH ON THE EVE OF 1857 - EVIDENCE OF THE URDU NEWSPAPER, "TILISM." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 765–774.
5. Roy, K. (2007). The Beginning of "People's War" in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1720–1728.
6. Murdoch, L. (2012). Suppressed Grief: Mourning the Death of British Children and the Memory of the 1857 Indian Rebellion. *Journal of British Studies*, 364–392.
7. Mukherji, R. (1984). *Awadh in revolt, 1857-1858*, Oxford University Press, 64-144.
8. Mukherjee, R. (2021). *Begum and a Rani: Hazrat Mahal and Laxmibai in 1857*. Penguin, 35-88.
9. Chauhan, Subhadra K. (2014), *Mukul Tatha anya Kavitaeyin*, Bhartiya Sahitya Inc.,
10. Jones, R. (2014), *Last king in India : Wajid Ali Shah*, C. Hurst & Co. Ltd.
11. http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadullah_Shah
12. Robb, P. (2007). On the Rebellion of 1857: A Brief History of an Idea. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(19), 1696–1702. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419572>
13. Husain, I. (1997). AWADH REBEL PROCLAMATIONS DURING 1857-58. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 58, 482–492. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44143952>
14. Husain, I. (1998). AWADH ON THE EVE OF 1857 - EVIDENCE OF THE URDU NEWSPAPER, "TILISM." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 59, 765–774. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147048>
15. Stubbings, M. (2016). British Conservatism and the Indian Revolt: The Annexation of Awadh and the Consequences of Liberal Empire, 1856–1858. *Journal of British Studies*, 55(4), 728–749. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26598928>
16. Metcalf, T. R. (1986). [Review of *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*, by R. Mukherjee]. *The American Historical Review*, 91(2), 447–448. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1858263>
17. Roy, K. (2007). The Beginning of "People's War" in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(19), 1720–1728. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419576>